“Promoting Regional Cooperation in an Atmosphere of Uncertainty”

Speaking Notes

for

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to the

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Thank you, Professor (Jim) Torczyzner.

I was very pleased to receive an invitation to speak at this session. It’s an honour for me to be among such distinguished guests, and to address such an important theme. The Working Paper asks some very challenging questions, and I’m sure that you’re eager to tackle them. For my part, I would like to look briefly at how we can use research as a peacebuilding tool that promotes greater regional cooperation. And how research can continue in turbulent areas with researchers from various sides in a conflicted region working together.

First, though, I’d like to give you some background about the International Development Research Centre. For the past 30 years, IDRC has worked to connect people, institutions and ideas. Ultimately, we want to ensure that the results of the research we support and the knowledge that the research generates are shared equally among all our partners, North and South.

Over the years, IDRC has supported thousands of skilled researchers in developing countries. It’s fair to say that IDRC-supported research is influencing national policies in fields as diverse as social and economic equity, peacebuilding and reconstruction, and environment and natural resources management. In addition, our support for the use of information and communication technologies is helping improve access to health and education, as well as the success rate of small business.

A considerable number of the researchers with whom we have worked have now served with governments, particularly the newly democratic governments in Latin America. Two examples are Ricardo Lagos, the new President of Chile, and President Cardosa of Brazil. Both men at one time were recipients of IDRC grants.

As I said at the outset, research is also a peacebuilding tool. It can help us better understand the dynamics of the conflict and the roles of key factors. The availability of concrete, universally accepted data can also speed up negotiations.

More than that, though, the very nature of the research process can promote consensus-building. Research brings people of like-minded interests together outside of a political framework. This in itself can be a small step towards peace, especially if the research process continues even as the peace process breaks down. And research means more than university-based researchers. Indeed, in many of our own projects, university researchers are working with non-governmental organizations or non-governmental research organizations.
Over the next few minutes, I’d like to talk about how IDRC is using research to promote regional cooperation in the Middle East. I’ll also briefly mention research projects that are helping war torn societies in Central America and southern Africa.

IDRC has been supporting research in the Middle East since 1972. Our work is supported by our regional office, which is based in Cairo. This office allows us to stay abreast of local conditions and trends, and to keep in close contact with our partners.

Since 1992, IDRC has managed a special program to support the developmental aspects of the Middle East peace process. It’s called the Expert and Advisory Services Fund, and like all of our programs, it favours multidisciplinary research.

Last July, for example, the Fund collaborated on a workshop with the Palestinian Refugee ResearchNet, which as you may know is based here at McGill. The workshop brought together Israeli, Palestinian and international experts to look at compensation as part of a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. The discussions were frank and productive, and led to several different, concrete scenarios.

More recently, the Fund contributed to an in-depth study about living conditions in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. The study’s findings are about to be published, and we expect them to provide insight into how to address the refugee issue.

In all of these projects, research offers a doorway into an issue. It creates a neutral space where diverse stakeholders can look at a problem from a more objective position. When all partners are committed to this process, they are more likely to buy into the results.

I’d like to mention two other IDRC projects in the Middle East, which are both related to water resources.

As you know, Israelis and Palestinians share an aquifer that is considered to be the single best source of water for both parties. If this aquifer is over-pumped, or misused, it could be contaminated with salt water. This would have a devastating impact on the availability of fresh water in the region.

It is clearly in the best interests of both Israel and Palestine to keep this aquifer working properly. To that end, IDRC is helping researchers from both parties to develop a model for joint management of the aquifer. I would note that the researchers have continued to work on this model, regardless of breakdowns in the peace process.

The second research project concerns the Dead Sea Basin. It’s no secret that water levels in the Dead Sea have been dropping steadily for the past 50 years. With funding from IDRC, Friends
of the Earth-Middle East has been assessing the impact of various factors on the ecology of the Dead Sea. These factors include everything from water diversion projects to the impact of the potash industry to the ever-increasing demands of tourism.

Of course, the sustainability of the Dead Sea is further complicated by competition for resources among Palestine, Israel and Jordan. The research has concluded that the region needs a joint management committee to ensure that commercial interests don’t overpower environmental concerns. Because, ultimately, if the environment loses out, then everyone loses.

It’s very likely that this project will enter a second phase. If that happens, over the next two years, researchers from Israel, Palestine and Jordan will look more closely at how the three parties can jointly manage the Dead Sea Basin. In particular, they will assess North American agreements on water management.

As you know, Canada and the United States have the longest undefended border in the world. Our two countries share many water resources, including the Great Lakes. I’m excited by the thought that the Middle East may be able to learn from our experiences — to possibly adapt what we’ve done right, and to avoid what we’ve done wrong.

I think that we all have a lot to learn from each other. No one has all the answers. And by sharing the information and knowledge we acquire through research, we may be able to quicken the pace of regional cooperation and development.

On that note, I’d like to briefly mention two other information sharing projects supported by IDRC — one in Central America, and the other in southern Africa.

Most Central American countries are faced with the huge challenge of reintegrating people who have been displaced by war. In Columbia, for example, nearly 1.2 million people have been internally displaced over the past 15 years. Their efforts to reintegrate people are hampered both by ongoing violence and by lack of coordination at the local, national and international levels.

With support from IDRC, seven countries are using research to develop reintegration strategies. The project will build the capacity of local, national and regional groups to interact with each other. As a result, it will foster space for information exchange and joint learning. This will lead, hopefully, to solutions and more stability in the lives of men, women and children.

In southern Africa, IDRC is helping to improve the clearance of anti-personnel mines. We work with governments, donors, NGOs and academia to generate reliable data, and build local research capacity. We also support greater collaboration within specific countries and within the region by providing electronic forums and Internet training. In Mozambique, the project has advanced so far that the key local partner is now offering training workshops in Angola.
In all its work, IDRC believes in the power of research to promote positive change, to foster communication and collaboration, and to allow people and governments with sometimes competing interests to find common ground. It is my hope that our research projects are making a difference in the Middle East, and that today’s session will stimulate new ideas and approaches for even greater regional cooperation.

Thank you.